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ABSTRACT

The Monash University (Australia) Transition to Tertiary Writing Project seeks to produce a World Wide Web-based resource for first-year students to facilitate their transition to the kinds of thinking and writing valued at the university. The background research on which this language and academic skills (LAS) project is based centers on three main types of collaboration. Of key importance was the interaction set up between six LAS lecturers and more than 20 first-year students across ten subjects. Also crucial are the relationships established with 13 lecturers from four faculties teaching the first-year subjects. In addition, interviews were conducted with Year 12 teachers who made observations about the likely difficulties they expected students to experience. Collaborations with these three groups of stakeholders yielded a number of insights about the challenges for students making the transition from school to university. The resulting Web-based resource represents an innovation in its attempt to capture both dimensions of this transition: a vertical one (school to university) and a lateral one (moving from one discipline specialty to the next). (Author/MES)

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COLLABORATING IN THE TRANSITION TO TERTIARY WRITING

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Abstract

The Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project seeks to produce a web-based resource for first-year students to facilitate their transition to the kinds of thinking and writing valued at university. The background research on which this language and academic skills (LAS) project is based centres on three main types of collaboration. Of key importance was the interaction set up between six LAS lecturers and more than twenty first-year students across ten subjects. Crucial too are the relationships established with thirteen lecturers from four faculties teaching the first-year subjects. In addition, interviews were conducted with Year 12 teachers who made observations about the likely difficulties they expected students to experience. Collaborations with these three groups of stakeholders yield a number of insights about the challenges for students making the transition from school to university. The resulting web-based resource represents an innovation in its attempt to capture both dimensions of this transition: a vertical one (school to university) and a lateral one (moving from one discipline specialism to the next).

Keywords

transition, student writing, web-based learning

Introduction

In undergraduate education, there is a need to find ways - both new ways and ones that are supplemental to any existing *good* practices - that make explicit for students the types of writing and researching that are required of them in their courses. For many students, the university situation represents a marked contrast to their secondary school experiences, where institutional practices and participant roles were clear: expectations were codified comprehensively in the form of quite specific assessment criteria and sub-criteria. At the university however, these practices and roles are not clear: expectations are often expressed as vague exhortations. The key concept of "critical analysis" is a case in point. Students are told frequently that they must adopt a "critical" attitude to their research, yet as Candlin (1998) points out, "disciplines are often unclear and inexplicit about what [this analysis] consists of" (p. 6).

Related to this lack of understanding about expectations and approaches is a lack of knowledge of the nature of university writing (Jones, Turner & Street, 1999). For students new to the academy, the problem often stems from a lack of access to appropriate generic models. They find themselves having to rely on, on the one hand, the "formative" genres of their secondary education (over which they have gained some mastery) and on the other hand the "expert" genres that make up the reading content of their course (which are clearly beyond their present abilities). Between these two poles, it can be difficult for students to find an appropriate novitiate discursive voice, one fashioned by an

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understanding of the textual structures, discursive processes, and institutional practices of their new writing context (Candlin, 1998). Language and academic skills (LAS) staff are often well-positioned within the teaching and learning environment to assist both students and subject lecturers.

The Monash Transition to Tertiary Writing Project, involving collaboration between the Language and Learning Services Unit and lecturers from four faculties, aimed to develop a web-based writing resource as one way of addressing students' difficulties.

The project team was a large one. The collaborations for the project, as well as being with teachers, students and lecturers, involved an educational developer, web developer, audio technician and multi-media graphic designer. The language and academic skills staff worked one-on-one with the subject lecturers and with the students. Between one and three first-year student volunteers were selected to participate (from a number volunteering) from each of the discipline areas above. The Associate Deans (Teaching) of the four faculties were also involved at the outset and their feedback was sought as the modules were published in relatively final form.

In this paper we provide an outline of the background research: what we learned from Year 12 teachers, from first-year students' writing experiences, and from the "institutional voice" – the lecturers' response. We also outline how this research fed the development of the project.

Aims of the Project

The project targeted ten first-year subjects: History, Literature, Philosophy, Sociology (Faculty of Arts), Commercial Law, Economics, Management and Marketing (Faculty of Business and Economics), Perspectives on Learning (Education), and Legal Process (Law). The objective was to develop a web-based module for each subject.

The project aimed to facilitate a more critical orientation to tertiary literacy for the students undertaking those subjects, with the following anticipated outcomes:

1. Students should be better positioned to understand what was required of them in their writing at university level.
2. With respect to lecturer expectations, it would be clearer to students how subtle changes in the use of language and structure can affect the success of a piece of writing. The lecturer feedback would be presented so as to provide maximum useable benefit for the student.
3. A "mentoring" experience would be provided, with the student able to draw on other students' experience of the personal organisation necessary to the essay-writing process, and thus on alternative approaches to writing tasks.
4. Some of the benefits of a one-on-one discussion with an academic skills or subject lecturer would be provided in the resource's focus on task/subject specific issues.
5. Students are often perceived as only "describing" when they should be "analysing": the resource would give students visible evidence of what terms such as "analysing" in their subject means.
6. The development of transferable thinking strategies may be encouraged as students are being encouraged to reflect on their learning.

To inform our development of the web modules, we carried out initial research into the Year 12 writing experience, and then the first-year writing experience – drawing on both lecturers and students.

Interaction with Year 12 Teachers

In order to elicit a *developmental* perspective on the precise nature of students' difficulty in these subjects, one of the project's first tasks was to conduct a series of focus groups with a total of 25 teachers of cognate Year 12 subjects at five schools in Victoria. The project leader conducted the interviews, took notes and brought them back to a project team meeting. In subsequent project development meetings the teacher information could be referred to in order to guide some of the decision-making processes. (It is intended that the teachers who contributed will be shown the resource once it is all published and invited to give feedback at that point). The Project Manager

also interviewed three further teachers (of Year 12 English/English Literature) to assist her in the development of her English module.

Teacher input was of particular relevance as students undertaking Year 12 in 2000 would be undergoing different writing experiences from those encountered in previous years under the CAT (Common Assessment Task) system in Victoria. (Under the CAT system, students were encouraged to research assignments by engaging in additional reading and then to develop the assignment through a series of drafts). Students entering university in 2001 and thereafter will have undertaken school-assessed coursework (SACS), "designed to reduce workload", which must be completed mainly in class within a limited timeframe.

In semi-structured focus groups, teachers were asked a short series of questions about the problems they thought students faced in adapting to university writing requirements. There was general agreement that they felt themselves to be not in the business of "preparing kids for uni". Their responsibility was seen as ensuring their students learn in such a way as to complete the requirements for their subjects and get the best marks possible. Looking ahead – and knowing their students well - they felt that they would have little idea how to use a university library, would be unlikely to know how to select texts, to determine what is most relevant, or how to skim read. Because of the ubiquity of the "set text", there was naturally a lack of exposure to different examples of disciplinary discourse in Year 12, and teachers believed students would not be aware that there were differences. In Year 12, students were not encouraged to browse the Internet, and except for certain subjects, were not given any guidance as to how to evaluate sites. In contrast to previous secondary years, Year 12 students were either told specific sites to consult, or advised that Internet research was "optional".

With respect to writing, the teachers identified the following areas as potential problems.

Understanding Expectations

Expectations for Year 12 writing continue to rest upon specific criteria to which marks are attached (eg. Criterion 1, 10 marks; Criterion 2, 10 marks; Criterion 3, 4 marks). Teachers assist students to identify where they have not met criteria. The question is treated as a springboard to talk about the topic. Students are often asked for "their opinion", and acknowledging sources is treated by them in a very "cavalier" fashion. They are taught referencing at every year level, but will plagiarise and believe that it is OK if you "can get away with it". With respect to their audience, students are often told "explain as if the reader doesn't understand", so they perceive that it is important in writing to show what you know. Other than for the top students, there is a tendency to agree with propositions in preference to grappling intellectually with issues raised ("they want to play parrot").

Drafting and Editing

In many subjects in Year 12, there is little experience of expanding, elaborating, feeling one's way. Word counts are strict; the teacher is there to give instant feedback. Some students are likely to approach university tasks by going to the other extreme and "over-playing" their writing, thinking that verbosity is what is required to be acceptable. For writing, in a number of Year 12 subjects, working on an assignment often involves getting the content right and not bothering about the form of words.

Writing at Length

Under the SACS system, there is the occasional 1,500 word assignment, but most are only 800-1,000 words. Deadlines are carefully managed and supervised; students are told when to begin, reminded when work is due; they discuss their work and receive comment on it in class; and they talk with their peers about it out of class. According to teachers, students fresh from Year 12 would have no idea how to set out the work and how to reference and format an assignment unless they were told.

The majority of this strikes us as so much received wisdom, but it is still interesting how uniform the teachers' views were across schools. Interesting too, how teachers' predictions suggested that a lot of the bother they believed students would find themselves in occurred precisely because libraries, essays, topics, deadlines were going to *look* the same, but they were not the same.

Our understanding from these discussions is that while some topics in VCE are more directive, sometimes it is the teaching strategies that may make them *appear* directive to students. For example, with DISCUSS questions, students are often encouraged to set up a strong line of argument on one side as a way of dealing with them. As one teacher explained:

> Certainly, I taught my students to set up a contention in relation to the topic, and encouraged them to see it as an argument in which they were trying to convince me of their point of view on the text. Without that kind of direction, they tend to just waffle without really saying anything.

In this way, students entering university are likely to have a perception that "there is a specific question requiring a definite and determined stance" from them.

Insights from First-year Students

The insights yielded from our discussions with students also served to guide the shaping of the material. A total of 27 students were interviewed by the six LAS lecturers: ten of these were audio-taped for the resource (some of the taped interviews were also transcribed, but most exist as audio). Notes were taken from the initial 27 discussions.

The kinds of adjustment problems predicted by the teachers relate to what might be called the "vertical transition" - that is from school to university. There is, however, also the "lateral" transition that students must negotiate as they move from one discipline specialism to the next, each arguably with its own distinctive discursive mode, "variations in knowledge structures and norms of inquiry, different vocabularies, differing standards of rhetorical intimacy" (Bhatia, Candlin & Hyland, 1997). In the literature on adjustment into academic culture - in both its vertical and lateral dimensions - a common metaphor for pedagogic processes is "the apprenticeship" (see for example "cognitive apprenticeship", Lave & Wenger, 1991). In such processes, the lecturer (or disciplinary expert) is thought to provide mentoring for the "apprentice" through processes of: i) modelling, to make tacit knowledge explicit; ii) coaching, by supporting students' attempts at performing new tasks and then iii) fading after having empowered the students to work independently (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989).

It is fair to say, however, that within undergraduate education, these types of "apprenticing" activities are often more desired than actual. Candlin (1998) reports, for example, that students do not perceive themselves to be tutored in this way: "there is simply not the close contact with experts on real-world problems that the term apprenticeship conventionally implies" (p. 21).

In our research for the project, we wanted more specific comments from first-year students about writing, and how prepared they felt themselves to be. We collected information from students in two ways: through an initial written survey conducted during tutorials for nine of the subjects (excluding Sociology due to time pressures); and through interviews with individual students who had also kept diaries of their essay-writing processes. Audio "bytes" of nine of these would be used on the site. In the survey, students were asked, *inter alia*, to rate how well they felt their year 12 assignment writing had prepared them for writing their current assignments. In order to get an accurate assessment of the students' *perception* of their preparedness, the survey was given to students prior to marks being released. A total of 287 responses were received.

The quantitative results of this survey are not overly surprising: on a scale of 5, where 1 is not very well prepared and 5 is very well prepared, the average across the disciplines was 3.2. Those students who felt that year 12 prepared them very well, with a rating of 4 or 5 out of 5, tended to view writing in terms of what they called "the basics": the mechanics of writing, such as paragraphing, structuring an essay, writing effective introductions and conclusions, being concise, focussing an argument, referencing, and so on. In contrast, those students who felt that year 12 had not prepared them well at all, with a rating of 1 or 2 out of 5, tended to view writing in broader terms that incorporated approach to the task as well as "the basics". These students commented on

the lack of guidance about what content to include; the fact that university essays required independent thinking; and that students had a greater freedom to interpret questions, to provide opinions, to seek out appropriate sources, and to create their own arguments.

The individual audio-taped interviews with students conducted by the LAS lecturers emphasised the distinctions between writing in year 12 and university. The students felt that, in addition to having fewer written guidelines and advice about what content to include, the questions themselves were "broad" and "less specific" at university, and that this was a fairly challenging change. Many students often perceived Year 12 questions to require a definite, unequivocal stance. As a consequence, as indicated by the survey results, a number felt unprepared for writing essays that required them to determine for themselves what content to include, and to construct a more complex and qualified argument. The students discuss these issues in the audio-clips found on the Annotated Assignments section of the web site.

Collaboration with Subject Lecturers

The third area of collaboration for the project explored the way university disciplines present their literacy practices and conventions to students. In this section, we discuss briefly some of the issues thrown up by the discussions with the subject lecturers. The reader can refer to Figures 1-5 below to see how the resource presents the student and lecturer contributions.

There is a general impression held by students that university subjects involve research, that students need to refer to "a range" of sources, that assignments involve "reasoned arguments". To the novice student, this sounds as if these assignments are much the same, and that the types of writing are much the same. Thus it was important that the resource tease out the detail of these differences. LAS lecturers, as well as being involved with the students, turned their attention to the subject lecturers to assist them to explicate their side of the story. For the Annotated Assignments section of each subject module, the lecturer were asked to stipulate exactly what he/she wanted from a particular topic, indicating what would elicit a Credit, a Distinction, and so forth. They were asked to review between one and four assignments writing "typically" brief annotations, but then adding explanatory comments to explicate for general student benefit. For example, for an annotation such as "Not enough detail", the typical student response is "well if I'd known what detail was wanted, I would have put it in!". The expanded comment provided on the web page gives the student more to work with.

For the development of the "Lecturer's Advice" section, a set of questions was designed to tease out the general impression mentioned above that all subjects require pretty much the same type of writing. The LAS lecturer adapted a basic set of questions relating to what the lecturer was *particularly* looking for, how much students should read, how they could avoid merely "describing" in that subject and so on, making the questions as subject-specific as they could. At the same time it was thought important to draw from the lecturer those aspects of the assignment which were generalisable to what could be called "the discipline" so as to give students optimal learning opportunities from the resource. The lecturer's written response was usually supplemented by a follow-up interview to clarify or expand where necessary. Finally, the LAS lecturer adapted these responses slightly, based on their experience of the students, and the material was then edited for the web. The success to which this was achieved can be seen in the relevant sections in each module. In each case, the lecturer was shown the module before the students used it and was able to offer further comments. There was widespread enthusiasm for the results of the collaboration, subject lecturers feeling that they had gained in understanding of "where their students were coming from" and how LAS lecturers could help. In a number of cases, amendments were made to subject materials, web sites and assignment questions as a consequence of these new understandings.

The Writing in Subject Areas Website

The web-based resource is made up of ten modules, one for each of the first year subjects listed. Students access the modules by selecting a subject/discipline from the Index page. The module then divides into three sections: Lecturer's Advice; Skills for Writing; and Annotated Assignments. The key component of the module is the sample assignment(s) produced by the student participants.

The first section of each module has as its focus the "institutional practices" of writing in the discipline, using the subject lecturer as informant. The list of frequently asked questions, along with a summary of the main types of writing difficulties experienced by undergraduates, includes elaboration of key concepts such as the meaning of "analysis" in the particular disciplinary context, as defined by the lecturer and refined for web consumption by the LAS lecturer.

The second section is organised around a range of interactive tasks, aimed at facilitating students' understanding of the nature of textual structures in their discipline (Moore & Clerehan, 2000) as in Figure 1. These tasks are different for each subject and the topics are selected in consultation with the lecturer.

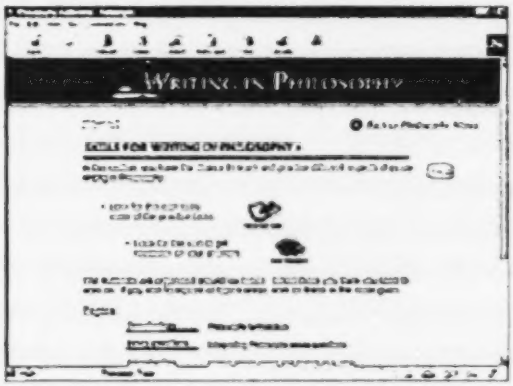

Figure 1: Skills for writing – Philosophy

The focus of the third section is on "the student", the "processes" involved in writing in the discipline; and the institutional expectations and response (see Figure 2 below). For each subject, there is at least one sample assignment (main essay or equivalent in each subject) where both student audio and lecturer commentary are available, in addition to the assignment itself and the lecturer's annotations. In the case of the other sample assignments, users of the resource will see only the assignment, the lecturer's annotations and the lecturer commentary which appears in a pop-up box. Students can print out the assignment to read if they wish.

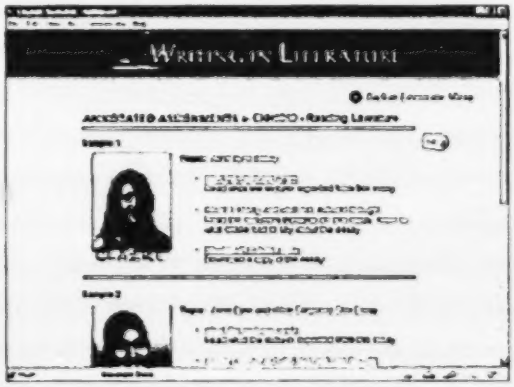

Figure 2: Sample assignment interface

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For the featured assignment, it was decided to suggest a sequenced approach (Figure 3 below). The first part, dealing with "What the lecturer wants", invokes both discursive processes and institutional practices as it presents the lecturer's explanation of what the topic requires (and descriptors for different grades), and invites the student to engage with how well the essay in question responds to these expectations. Students are, at this stage, presented with an unmarked essay. They are then invited to take a further step and think how the essay may have been improved. Finally, they are asked to view the annotated essay.

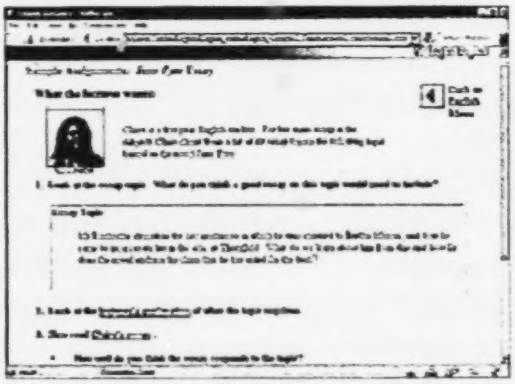

Figure 3: What the lecturer wants

At this point, the student users can click on the audio icons and listen to the essay's author tell how they went about researching and composing the sample assignments, beginning with their first engagement with the essay topic to their submission of the final piece of work (see Figure 4 below for layout). The students also reflect on their broad approach to university writing, and also on what comparisons can be drawn with their experiences of secondary school writing. In accessing this section of the module, other students will have the opportunity to hear the voices of fellow students, in an interaction modelled to some extent on the notion of peer mentoring.

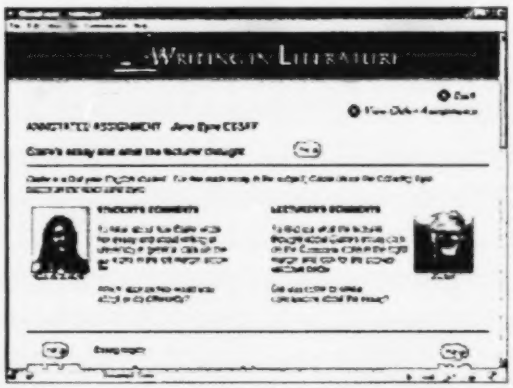

Figure 4: Claire's essay, introductory material

There is a counterpoint to this page, with the students' understandings of the task considered in relation to the lecturer's response to it (see Figure 5), both in the form of annotation and also elaborated in pop-up boxes. We hope this will lead to a more informed and critical appraisal of what is involved in institutional expectations and what is involved in actually researching and composing an assignment in this discipline. At the end of the paper, the student's impressions of their completed essays is juxtaposed with the lecturer's own final assessment.

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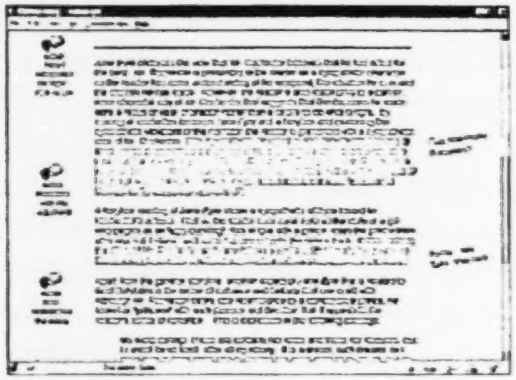

Figure 5: Claire's essay and comments

Conclusion

A great deal of formative evaluation has informed the development of the resource so far. The collaborations engaged in for the Transition to Tertiary Writing Project in some cases exist as background: in others, they feed directly into the resource materials. The Year 12 teachers' perspective is a valuable back-drop, highlighting the student difficulties which may arise from restricted exposure to selecting and using sources, and from having experienced very different types of writing in Year 12. The first-year students - the focus of the project - expressed their need for explicit illustrations of lecturers' expectations and also of exposure to key aspects of writing in the disciplines. Finally, the institutional representatives - the lecturers - have been able to explicate further their expectations of students, demonstrating more clearly to them that there are in fact special qualities of the writing and thinking which mark the differences between the subjects.

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